



March 5, 2022

Dear Co-Chairs Cohen and Gresko:

My name is Neil Johnson, I am a Store Manager for REI Co-op in Milford, CT., and a Board Member of the Connecticut Outdoor Recreation Alliance (CORA), and I am testifying today in support of **Raised House Bill 5291, An Act Authorizing Bonding for Bikeways, Greenways, and Recreational Trails.**

CORA is a coalition of over 70 businesses, organizations, and individuals who support the protection and development of Connecticut's *outdoor recreation economy*. We believe outdoor recreation is created through the intersection of resources (e.g., parks, trails, and waterways), users (e.g., hikers, boaters, and skiers), and organizations (e.g., businesses, non-profits, and educational institutions).

REI Co-op is a retailer of outdoor gear and apparel that enables all people to enjoy the outdoors safely and responsibly. With three stores in Connecticut employing more than 200 individuals and generating more than \$35M in revenue, we know firsthand the increased interest and demand for quality, local resources for recreation in the state of Connecticut.

We support Raised House Bill 5291, An Act Authorizing Bonding for Bikeways, Greenways. This program is essential to Connecticut for several reasons:

People are using trails more than ever. UCONN Extension's Trail Census documented increased trail use during the pandemic as residents found respite outdoors. The Outdoor Industry Association reports participation in outdoor recreation remains high even as the pandemic lessens. We expect the need for investments in outdoor recreation to continue.

There is significant need for trails funding. DEEP recently awarded Recreational Trails and Greenways Grants totaling \$3 million to help plan, build, and improve trails across the state. A great start, but it received applications requesting over \$22 million, of which highly ranked proposals alone totaled over \$7 million. The previous grant cycle also funded a fraction of what was requested and similarly declined highly ranked proposals due to a lack of funds. A cycle of underfunding coupled with increased use and demand is a recipe for irreparable degradation of valuable Connecticut resources.

Investing in recreational trails has a multiplier effect that contributes to strengthening Connecticut's economy and residents' quality of life. UCONN Extension's trail impact series shares research on how trail users spend money at local businesses, home buyers value proximity to trails, equitable access to fitness activities

improves public health, and trails provide transportation alternatives and complement conservation projects (cttrailcensus.uconn.edu/trail-impact-series).

That is why I urge the State to promote Connecticut's outdoor recreation assets and invest in related businesses and infrastructure. Please begin by ensuring more adequate funding for the State and its municipal and nonprofit partners to expand and improve access to public recreational trails.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Neil Johnson", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Neil Johnson
Store Manager
REI Co-Op, Milford, CT.